



GBU-38 munitions are dropped on insurgent torture house and prison in Northern Zambraniyah, Iraq, March 2008

Shock and Awe a Decade and a Half Later Still Relevant, Still Misunderstood

BY HARLAN K. ULLMAN

Fifteen years ago, a small group of former senior military and civilian defense officials were troubled by the debate over American military strategy and its associated force posture.¹ Given the implosion of the Soviet Union half a decade earlier and the stunning and overwhelming victory in the 100-hour Gulf War of 1991, the predominance of the U.S. military was assured. The weaponry was technologically the best in the world and the fighting force unmatched in ability. In essence, the first Gulf War finally cast off the dark shadow and unhappy legacy of Vietnam once and for all.

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But this group remained unsettled. Strategy was still premised on firepower and attrition and embedded with former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Colin Powell's focus on "decisive" force. In the context of conflict with the Soviet Union or Iraq, when armies, navies, and air forces could do battle with other armies, navies, and air forces, the Powell Doctrine made sense. And the implications meant that our military still required top-of-the-line, very expensive weapons systems from tanks and armored personnel vehicles to stealthy fighter aircraft and nuclear submarines.

Furthermore, neither the George H.W. Bush administration nor the subsequent Clinton presidency at that stage took what we thought was full advantage of the end of the Cold War and the Gulf War in reconfiguring our strategy and force posture. Instead, they decided to downsize the force by less than a third in total

knowing where to "put the needle" to take Saddam Hussein down without destroying his military capacity first. These intuitions provoked us into action.

The result became known as *shock and awe*, a marvelously provocative phrase that subsequently became distorted and maligned and would quickly sink without a trace in the first days of the second Iraq War, launched in 2003, that led to Saddam's downfall and a painful occupation of that country that continues today. Why and how that happened are interesting diversions. More important is the correct understanding of what shock and awe meant and why the concept is as relevant or more so today when there are no armies and navies to fight—certainly none in the conflicts that consume us in Afghanistan and Iraq. And anyone who reckons to take on China in conventional war should examine his or her assumptions carefully.

Shock and awe made its debut in a 1996 publication sponsored by the National Defense University titled *Shock and Awe: Achieving Rapid Dominance*. Two years later, the Royal United Services Institute in London published a sequel entitled *Rapid Dominance: A Force for All Seasons*² that proposed recommendations for experimenting with and testing the concept along with specific ideas for designing and deploying a shock and awe force including weapons and command and control systems.

What Is Shock and Awe?

First, a brief reminder of what shock and awe was designed to do would be useful. Using the philosophy of Sun Tzu, shock and awe, as Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld put it, was a way to get people to do what we wanted and stop doing things that we did not want—or to win the war without having to fight the

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numbers while keeping the same general configuration for the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force, and emphasizing firepower to attrite any adversary. The difficulty was there were few adversaries left to fight in battles conceived for the inner German border and the onslaught of the Red Army.

Another nagging problem concerned us. General Charles Horner, USAF, who commanded the air war in Operations *Desert Shield* and *Desert Storm* and went on to serve as commander of the Air Force Space Command, complained that in his bombardment of Iraq and its key targets, he was frustrated by not



DOD (Helene C. Stikkel)

battle. Our wording was more technical. Shock and awe was about affecting, influencing, and controlling will and perception. Hence, it recognized the Clausewitzian dictum that war was ultimately a conflict of wills.

In our usage, *shock* meant the ability to intimidate, perhaps absolutely; to impose overwhelming fear, terror, vulnerability, and the inevitability of destruction or rapid defeat; and to create in the mind of the adversary impotence, panic, hopelessness, paralysis, and the psychological incentives leading to capitulation. In general, shock would best be achieved with great suddenness, surprise, and unexpectedness.

If shock worked best when rapidly administered, the enduring aspect was *awe*. Awe may be present in the absence of shock in that a target or an adversary could be convinced to accept our will by the perception or reality of our overwhelming ability to affect, influence, and control his or her actions. In practical terms, shock often reinforces or creates awe. But to achieve long-term or lasting effects, it is awe rather than shock that is the applicable mechanism.

Rather than use more traditional criteria for defining shock and awe and its key components, four unconventional categories emerged. First was total knowledge. While recognizing that total knowledge was practically impossible to achieve, the intent was to develop sufficient understanding of the target or adversary, its culture and psychology, and the specific military and other capabilities that were in hand. The military side is often referred to as situational awareness. Our aim was to go much further—to understand how the adversary thought and would react. Hence, cultural understanding was as crucial

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as the enemy order of battle. To our detriment, a grave and potentially fatal weakness in U.S. strategy in Afghanistan and Iraq and before that in Vietnam was little or no cultural understanding, a flaw the U.S. military has been urgently trying to rectify since the Iraqi insurgency began in earnest in late 2003.

The second category was control of the environment. This meant that, night or day, we could control what the adversary saw or heard, or did not see or hear. It meant depriving the adversary of situational awareness and ensuring that any information or intelligence that was picked up conformed to what we wanted the enemy to have. Deception and disinformation were part of this, morphing images of enemy leadership as needed to dissemble and confuse and give wrong orders or messages.

Third was rapidity, meaning that we had to respond at all levels more quickly than the

enemy. Unfortunately, as we are seeing in Iraq and Afghanistan, particularly with improvised explosive devices, the enemy has proved more agile than we. Use of rapidity, if achievable, would reverse this.

Finally, the standard was brilliance in operations. We came close to achieving this level in *Desert Storm* and certainly in *Iraqi Freedom*. Operations had to be dazzling in execution and impact to achieve a sense of shock and awe. Fortunately, American fighting men and women have risen to the task. Where the real problems have arisen are in the whole-of-government approaches to nonmilitary tasks and, of course, in operations where there was no enemy army or air force to defeat and war was about the people and securing their support.

To tie these characteristics together, shock and awe was output- and effects-based. The ultimate political or strategic objective was defined first, and strategists then worked backward to bring together all the necessary military and nonmilitary tools to achieve that end. This was not done in either Operation *Enduring Freedom* in Afghanistan, where the object was to overthrow the Taliban and hunt down al Qaeda, or *Iraqi Freedom*, where destroying the Iraqi army, getting to Baghdad, and removing Saddam from power were the objectives. Shock and awe departed profoundly in this regard by getting the political aims right in the first place.

Examples of Shock and Awe

To demonstrate levels of shock and awe and means to achieve both, 10 examples were derived. These examples are not exclusive categories and overlap exists between and among them. The first is Decisive Force. The aim was to apply massive or overwhelming force as quickly as possible on an adversary in order to disarm, incapacitate, or render the enemy

militarily impotent with as few casualties and losses to ourselves and to noncombatants as possible. The superiority of American forces, technically and operationally, is crucial to the successful application of decisive force.

The second example is Hiroshima and Nagasaki, in which a nation and government that seemed willing to commit suicide rather than surrender could be forced into rapid capitulation even though it had suffered massive numbers of casualties through intense aerial bombardments and blockades. The intent is to impose a regime of shock and awe through delivery of instant, nearly incomprehensible levels of massive destruction directed at influencing society writ large, meaning its leadership and public, rather than targeting military or strategic objectives even with relatively few numbers or systems. This example of shock, awe, and intimidation rests on the proposition that such effects must occur in short periods. Unfortunately, while this example was meant to show how to control the will and perception of a seemingly inflexible enemy, the mention of nuclear weapons led to the impression that this condition could only be applied through their use. That was wrong but understandable. What is interesting today is whether shock and awe could be used to deter or dissuade jihadist extremists and other religious radicals from becoming suicide bombers.

Third is Massive Bombardment. This example applied massive and, perhaps today, relatively precise destructive power largely against military targets and related sectors over time—a kind of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in slow motion and with conventional munitions. It is unlikely to produce an immediate effect on the will of the adversary to resist. In a sense, this is an endurance contest in which the enemy is finally broken through exhaustion. However, it

is the cumulative effect of this application of destructive power that will ultimately impose sufficient shock and awe, as well as perhaps destroy the physical means to resist, and that will force an adversary to accept whatever terms may be imposed. The trench warfare of World War I, the strategic bombing campaign in Europe of World War II (which was not effective in this regard), and related B-52 raids in Vietnam and especially over the New Year period of 1972–1973 illustrate the application of massive bombardment.

The fourth example is Blitzkrieg. In real Blitzkrieg, shock and awe was not achieved through the massive application of firepower across a broad front or through the delivery of massive levels of force. Instead, the intent was to apply precise, surgical amounts of tightly focused force to achieve maximum leverage but with total economies of scale. The German *Wehrmacht*'s Blitzkrieg was not a massive attack across a broad front, although the opponent may have been deceived into believing that. Instead, the enemy's line was probed in multiple locations and, wherever it could be most easily penetrated, attack was concentrated in a narrow salient. The image is that of the shaped charge, penetrating through a relatively tiny hole in a tank's armor and then exploding outward to achieve a maximum cone of damage against the unarmored or less protected innards.

Fifth and sixth are derived from the Chinese philosopher-warrior Sun Tzu and were based on selective, instant decapitation of military or societal targets to achieve shock and awe. This discrete or precise nature of applying force differentiates this example from the Hiroshima and Nagasaki and massive bombardment examples. Sun Tzu was brought before Ho Lu, the King of Wu, who had read all of Sun Tzu's 13 chapters on war and proposed a test

of Sun's military skills. Ho asked if the rules applied to women. When the answer was yes, the king challenged Sun Tzu to turn the royal concubines into a marching troop. The concubines merely laughed at Sun Tzu until he had the head concubine decapitated. The ladies still could not bring themselves to take the master's orders seriously, so Sun Tzu had the head cut off a second concubine. From that point on, so the story goes, the ladies learned to march with the precision of a drill team.

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The next Sun Tzu example is based on the premise that all war is deception, misinformation, and disinformation. In this case, the attempt is to deceive the enemy into what we wish them to perceive and thereby trick, cajole, induce, or force the adversary. The thrust or target is the perception, understanding, and knowledge of the adversary. Two illustrations are the Trojan horse and the 19th-century revolt of native Haitians against French control. The Haitian leaders staged a martial parade for the visiting French military contingent and marched a handful of battalions repeatedly in review. The French were tricked into believing that the native forces numbered in the tens of thousands and concluded that French military action was futile and that its forces would be overwhelmed. As a result, the Haitians were able to achieve their freedom without firing a shot.

Seventh is Britain's Special Air Service model, which is distinct from the Blitzkrieg or Sun Tzu examples because it focuses on

depriving an adversary of its senses in order to impose shock and awe. The image here is the hostage rescue team employing stun grenades to incapacitate an adversary, but on a far larger scale. The stun grenade produces blinding light and deafening noise. The result shocks and confuses the adversary and makes him senseless. The aim is to produce so much light and sound as to deprive the adversary of all senses, and therefore to disable and disarm him. Without senses, the adversary becomes impotent and entirely vulnerable.

Eighth is the Roman example. Achieving shock and awe rests in the ability to deter and overpower an adversary through the adversary's perception and fear of his own vulnerability and our invincibility, even though applying ultimate retribution could take considerable time. This is how Rome ruled its empire. If an untoward act occurred, the perpetrator could rest assured that Roman vengeance ultimately would take place. This model was exemplified by British "gunboat diplomacy" in the 19th century when the British fleet would return to the scene of any crime against the crown and exact its retribution through the wholesale destruction of offending villages.

The ninth example of shock and awe is Decay and Default, which is based on the imposition of societal breakdown over a lengthy period but without the application of massive destruction. This example is obviously not rapid but cumulative. In this example, both military and societal values are targets. Selective and focused force is applied. It is the long-term corrosive effects of the continuing breakdown in the system and society that ultimately compel an adversary to surrender or to accept terms. Shock and awe is therefore not immediate either in application or in producing the end result. Economic embargoes, long-term policies

that harass and aggravate the adversary, and other types of punitive actions that do not threaten the entire society but apply pressure just as Chinese water torture does, a drop at a time, are the mechanisms. Finally, the preoccupation with the decay and disruption of society produces a variant of shock and awe in the form of frustration collapsing the will to resist.

The last is the Royal Canadian Mounted Police example, whose unofficial motto was “never send a man where you can send a bullet.” The distinction of this example from Sun Tzu’s is proximity and standoff. U.S. drone attacks launched against al Qaeda and Taliban in Northwest Pakistan are illustrative. Whether the continued attrition of enemy leaders breaks the will of others or not remains to be seen. However, shock and awe from the suddenness of these attacks are surely generated.

Relevant but Misunderstood

Why and how shock and awe has been misapplied is unfortunate. Donald Rumsfeld as a part-time member of the group certainly understood the tenets of shock and awe. But the aim of the George W. Bush administration was to get in and out of Iraq as quickly as possible. The U.S. Central Command commander, General Tommy Franks, USA, and Rumsfeld worked interactively to develop the war plans. The Joint Chiefs were purposely kept at arm’s length from the war planning process, at least initially, to minimize bureaucratic interference from Washington. And the fact that the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff was General Richard Myers, an Air Force and not an Army officer, did not help, as *Iraqi Freedom* was predominantly a ground war.

General Franks liked the term *shock and awe* because it implied a lightning campaign. And his orders were to move quickly and get

out quickly. The Air Force liked the phrase because it emphasized airpower and the argument, wrong as it was, that wars can be won from the air—a throwback to the case for strategic bombing that has persisted from the 1930s to today.

A few days after the war began with a combined air and ground assault, the British newspaper *The Daily Telegraph* ran an almost-full-page color photo of a U.S. or British bomb exploding in Baghdad in graphic detail. The large headline read: “Baghdad Blitz.” The reference to World War II and the Nazi bombing of Britain doomed shock and awe. It was not used again by Franks, the Air Force, or anyone else.

Had shock and awe in fact been applied in Iraq, the start point would have been the outcome that was to be achieved. Merely defeating the Iraqi army and dethroning Saddam were not sufficient. Building a stable and somewhat pluralistic state under the rule of law was. Hence, there would have been far more attention paid to the “What next?” question and recognition given to the reality that the peace would prove far more difficult than the war.

Is shock and awe relevant today? There are few armies and navies to fight. Our forces possess huge advantages. Yet conflict has shifted to and about the people. And success means providing the capacity for local populations to take on their own security.

By focusing on total knowledge, control of the environment, rapidity, and brilliance in operations along with outcome- or effects-based strategies, shock and awe can inform both the military and civilian sides essential for success. Whether it can deter, convince, or cajole jihadist extremists willing to die for their cause is an interesting question. That it worked in Japan may or may not be relevant. Examining the 10 examples of shock and awe is relevant, however.

Can we develop countermessages and messaging through deception or disinformation or telling the truth? Can selective targeting help or hinder? More important, can total knowledge or its pursuit provide insights to help disrupt, dismantle, and defeat terrorist networks? That answer is not immediately knowable. But there surely is good reason to give shock and awe another chance. [PRISM](#)

Notes

¹ The original group consisted of General Frederick M. Franks, Jr., USA, commander of VII Corps in Operation *Desert Storm*; General Charles A. Horner, USAF, air war commander; Thomas R. Morgan, former Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps; Admiral Leon A. Edney, USN, Supreme Allied Commander Atlantic; Admiral Jonathan T. Howe, commander in chief, U.S. Naval Forces Europe; Dr. John S. Foster, Jr., former Pentagon director of research; Dr. James Wade, former Pentagon assistant for nuclear policy and head of acquisition; and myself. Joining the group later as observers were Donald H. Rumsfeld (before he assumed the post of Secretary of Defense a second time) and Admiral Leighton Smith, former commander in chief, U.S. Naval Forces Europe.

² In retrospect, Rapid Dominance turned out not to be the right name, as it implied other activities that diluted the meaning and focused attention away from shock and awe. A second error was not appreciating that in the examples of shock and awe that follow, greater caveats should have been used in the Hiroshima and Nagasaki cases in order to demonstrate that it was the effects that made the point and not the reference to nuclear weapons. The reference, unfortunately, led some people to conclude shock and awe was dependent on atomic weapons, which it certainly was not.